Hewitt

# GRIEF

In an interview on PBS recently, Susan Sontag said she wrote from a sense of grief, that probably all writers do. If this is indeed true in my case — and what she said rang true for me — as I write this and with fifty years perspective on my childhood, I can say that my grief is for loss of size — size that I never had.

When I was five years old, my nursemaid Hazel was taking me for "a walk" in my stroller down to the village. We encountered a group of children from the local kindergarten along with their teacher. Suddenly I was filled with dread. They were the same size as I was but they were mostly little more than toddlers. I took a deep breath and asked Hazel "How old are those children?" "Oh, three and four". It was as if someone had taken a knife and stabbed me in the heart. What hit me was the awful truth: that I wasn't growing like other children. I tried not to think why I couldn't walk yet. I always pushed that thought down behind my consciousness like a secret document in a locked drawer. When we got home I asked my mother why I wasn't growing like other children. Instead of explaining about O.I. she simply replied "It doesn't matter that you're disabled because you're brilliant. "At first I was consoled by this reply but that night I couldn't sleep. I had never considered my size before. Now whenever I saw my tiny feet which then and even today resemble toddlers' feet, they seem to accuse me, "You see" they said, "You're a dwarf." "But I'm brilliant" I would answer them. But my feet just lay there like a reproach as if to say "So what? What does that matter?"

Of course my feet were right. Being brilliant doesn't compensate for disability or lack of size. My mother had meant well by her comment. She was probably nonplussed and fear-stricken by my question. Having looked at my tiny limbs that day, especially my feet, for fifteen years or so (until I began to console myself with alcohol) I visualized how my legs ought to look — long, smooth, muscular. If I hadn't had O.I. I think probably I would have been an athlete — I had

excellent hand/eye coordination before my stroke in '93 and fantasized about being a tennis player. As a teenager I was a tennis fanatic — watching Laver, Rosewall, Borg and all the greats on T.V. for hours at a time. I of course had crushes on the players. I felt at one with them.

I bought a tennis racquet and messed around with it and one of those balls on an elastic string for hours in the backyard. Once when on vacation with my parents at a hotel in Bournemouth on the South coast of England, I insisted my father play tennis with me on a real court. He was very reluctant. He said he didn't think I would be able to hit the ball over the net. Not only could I not hit the ball over the net, when I served from my wheelchair on the base line the ball only went about a third of the way to the net; again, the gap, the missing length. Even today I sometimes go into a shoestore and try on a pair of shoes I see in the window, vainly hoping that by some magic I now had feet of adult-size. My feet feel and even look to me "normal" size when clothed in shoes. But instead of a size five, I take a "two" — You need children's shoes, " says the salesman. Lately I'm resigned. The last pair I bought, I asked for size two. Nothing to be ashamed of. I have nice shoes, I have handsome feet — pristine, undamaged by the pressure of walking, free of pain. In this society there's discrimination against "irregular" size — whether you are "two tall," "too short."

It seems as if every man is supposed to be at least six feet. I am two foot six. Perhaps my lack of size made me a writer; in my writing I am as big as anyone. I can make beautiful poems. In this I am lucky. To make beautiful poems I suppose you do have to be brilliant. Being a successful published writer does console me. I'm proud of my work. Even being smaller than others doesn't bother me as it used to. I rather enjoy making able-bodied folks "vertically-challenged" when I'm whizzing about San Francisco in my chair and my writing is going well. My friends say I have a big heart; that's what really counts they say.

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